

promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which are in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

# The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

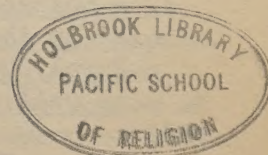
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## THIS WAY OUT for the Town and Country Church

By James M. Carr\*



The town and country church situation in all denominations presents one of our most acute problems and, at the same time, offers our most challenging opportunity for permanent and continual growth for the Church as a whole.

We face a great danger signal. If the present trend in the rural church continues, Protestant life may dry up at its most important and fruitful source.

The rural church is important. Of many reasons I mention two:

1. Rural communities are the source of our surplus population. Urban communities are failing by thirty-one per cent in rearing enough children to replace themselves. Rural farm people are rearing forty-five per cent more than enough children to replace themselves. It is true that the urban population is increasing and the rural population is slowly decreasing. But let us not be confused as to the real source of growth. Their growth comes from our rural communities which each generation send one-half of their young people into urban centers to replenish business, industry, and our churches.

2. The rural church is the source of our highest spiritual birth rate. On the average, it is almost double the spiritual birth rate of urban churches. Most of our growth as a denomination is seen in our urban churches. But this growth is largely by letter of transfer. Usually these transfers are from a smaller church in a town or country community.

The situation is critical for many reasons. There has been, and still is, a high death rate among rural churches. Many rural churches lapse into insignificance and offer a very inadequate program of service to their community. Many rural churches are in over-competitive communities where there are more churches than the people can support. The rapid growth of the "isms" and newer religious bodies is occasioned by a weak, struggling, inadequate rural church.

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Pastors' salaries are too low in many rural fields. There prevails a false standard of measuring success, resulting in the opinion that if a minister remains in a rural field for too long he has failed as a minister. In many rural churches pastorates are short and there are long vacancies. These and other reasons reveal that the situation is critical.

What is the way out? The solution is not found in saying: "There is no problem." Nor is it found in bemoaning the fate of the rural church. May I suggest five changes which I believe point toward the solution of the rural church problem today.

I. A Changed Attitude in the Church as a Whole  
as to the Fundamental Necessity for a Strong  
Rural Church for the Welfare of Rural People  
as well as for the Welfare of the Church as a Whole

The present attitude which is held by many urban and rural pastors, and by many urban and rural people, is seen in two illustrations:

A short time ago I received an anonymous letter, the first and only one since becoming Secretary of the Town and Country Church Department. My first reaction was to throw it in the wastebasket. But I read it again and again. I do not know why it was sent anonymously because it does express in a very definite way the present attitude that is held by many people. This anonymous writer states: "I know a minister who chose as his life work the rural church. He was not accorded the privilege due those called to His service but rather the patronizing sympathy saved for the poor unfortunates who fall short of attaining the coveted rungs of the ladder of success." Later in the letter our anonymous writer spoke of an occasion when he or she was in conversation with a young lady employed in one of our church offices. Their conversation led to the mention of a mutual friend, an Assembly's Training School classmate of the young lady. This friend was doing excellent work in a needy rural community without benefit of minister. Then this young lady said to our anonymous writer: "We could never understand her going to that work. She was the brightest girl in our class and could have had her pick of any of the choice openings."

When I was a seminary student, on one occasion I was having dinner in the home of my first cousin. She is about ten years older than I. She was reared in a small town and, even at that time, was rearing her children in a small town. In discussing my plans and hopes in the ministry, she said: "James don't go to a small town to preach. Go to the city." Now we can place blame for this general attitude upon no one. It is just the spirit of our age. But the result is seen in the fact that we have let the country church down and—the Church as a whole is suffering; the whole Christian movement is suffering; and our civilization is suffering.

We are making progress in bringing about a changed attitude, but we must keep it up.

II. A Changed Conception on the Part of Ministers  
and Candidates for the Ministry from Thinking  
of the Rural Church as a Place of Preparation  
for Urban Work or a Place to Spend the Last Few  
Years in the Ministry after a Successful Career  
in an Urban Church

Fundamentally this means a changed conception as to what constitutes a divine call, not only to the ministry itself but also to a definite field of service. I feel that everyone should think of a call to a church as a permanent call to a permanent work. When he begins his ministry there, he should project his plans over his entire span of life. He should think of his work as a service to the people who are there now and should not be so much concerned with what this work might mean in preparing him for some other work later on. This does not mean that a man should never move. In the providence of God, men are called to various kinds of service. They are called from one church to another. But in accepting a call a minister's attitude should be that "this is God's call to me to serve in this church, and I must build my program around that sense of divine call."

Recently I have visited two rural churches, both of which refuted the conception that a rural church is the steppingstone upward or downward. The pastor of one is a young man who was reared in one of the largest cities in the South. He received his entire training as a youth in an urban church. He graduated from the seminary and accepted a call to an open country church. And he now is responding to a great challenge in developing that old church and is declining over and over again to respond to overtures from urban churches to become their pastor. He is happy in this rural church and is finding there a great opportunity.

The pastor of the other church is a man who had thirty-two years of successful ministry in three urban churches. He accepted a call to an open country church in 1941. To him it was not a place of retirement to easier work. It became a great challenge. With a vision far beyond many of younger years, he has led that church out into an aggressive program of building and growth. The historical past of his two-century-old church is symbolized in the ninety-year-old sanctuary erected during the dark days of the Civil War. The prophetic future of his active church is symbolized in the new \$65,000 educational building close by. This pastor is spending the happiest years of his ministry among a people who love him. The rural church to him has not been a place of easy work but a place of effective service.

Here are two men, only two among many, who are living examples of a much needed change--a change which is taking place as more and more ministers and candidates see the challenge of the rural church and respond to it.

### III. A Changed Curriculum in our Seminaries to Provide More Adequate Training for Rural Church Work

A brief glimpse at our church's history reveals that the "country church problem" was acute at least forty years ago. The General Assembly set up a committee to study and report. This committee existed, studied, and reported through the years until 1925, when it made its final report and recommended among other things that the seminaries offer a one-year course on "The Country Church," covering twenty-eight weeks with two periods each week. The course recommended was outlined in four subjects: (1) The Bible and Country Life, (2) Country Life as Distinctive from Urban, (3) The Organization of Country Life, and (4) The Country Pastor and His Work. (To this might be added such courses as: A Study of Rural Social and Economic Problems; Rural Community Organization; and A General Course in Agriculture.)

The report also recommended the establishment of the Country Church Department and the election of a director. A part of his duties, assigned by the Assembly, was "lecture courses and classes in our four theological seminaries and the Assembly's Training School." The Assembly established the Country Church Department, and my honored predecessor through the years, despite strong opposition from some of less vision, has made our denomination country church conscious.

But the Assembly had no control over the seminaries. Their curricula in the past have been determined by tradition, by faculties, and by trustees whose background is largely urban. Changes in the curriculum of a seminary come slowly. But these changes have begun, and our church now is beginning to make the progress we should have made twenty-five years ago. Two of our seminaries have rural church departments; another has an active program of field work which administers a training program in three larger parishes involving sixteen rural churches. These programs in our seminaries are making a valuable contribution in two ways. They are giving our candidates, now coming in increasing numbers from urban churches, a wholesome attitude toward the rural church, and they are also giving them the definite preparation they need for service in rural churches. But the professors of rural church in our seminaries would be the very first ones to state that we need to do more. A recent study of seminary catalogs of another denomination reveals that at least seventeen courses are designed to prepare students for the rural ministry.

#### IV. A Changed Program in Our Rural Churches

We are told that country people move slowly. The term "cultural lag" applies to the rural church perhaps more so than to any other rural institution. The slowness of rural churches to change their program to meet the changing needs of our rural people is one definite reason why many rural people are not in the churches. At the same time, this gives rise to the many "isms" and newer religious groups which are growing so rapidly in so many places.

Governor W. Kerr Scott of North Carolina, an active layman in a rural Presbyterian church of his state, spoke at the Town and Country Pastors' Institute at Union Theological Seminary recently. Among other things, he said: "In the last fifty years in rural North Carolina we have made very little progress with the rural church.... The most we have done in a good many areas...is to pay the church about every ten years and clean the cemetery off at homecoming day. That has been our program...but the church must move along."

Just one contrast serves as an example of what we mean. Spend an hour in the classroom of a consolidated rural public school and observe the teaching done by a teacher who is qualified and knows how to teach. Then go to some rural Sunday school where the teaching is done by a person who may be qualified spiritually but who is far from being prepared to teach the Sunday school lesson.

There are many rural churches which are meeting the needs of rural people through an adequate program. This is far more than a preaching service once a month, an annual revival, and a poorly conducted Sunday school. The rural church should have just as vital and varied a program of worship, preaching, teaching, and service as any urban church. Where such rural churches are serving all classes of people in their community, the "isms" and newer religious groups are practically nonexistent.





V. A Changed Denominational Policy for  
Receiving and Dispensing Benevolent Funds

The town and country church provides most of the real growth of the denomination as a whole. In sending forth a steady stream of trained youth into urban churches it is left depleted, not only of members but also of means. Therefore, many rural churches must be aided financially in a statesmanlike policy and as a church-wide strategy. This is in contrast to the conception of some that home mission appropriations are charity to less fortunate churches.

Rural people have more dependents than urban people. Local rural churches on the average have only one-fourth as many members as urban churches. Rural income, on the average, is only about one-third of urban income per capita. There is a steady migration of rural wealth, as well as rural youth, to urban centers. These are definite reasons why urban churches, which are the source of most benevolent money, must support rural churches, which are the source of life and leadership for all churches, rural and urban alike.

There are evidences that these five changes are taking place. Encouraging signs are seen on the horizon. These signs must be boosted and accelerated. They will be, and the traditional "Little Brown Church in the Wildwood" will be the growing church in the open country, in the village, and in the town. And an ever-increasing multitude of rural people—children, youth, adults, the aged—will say more and more: "This is none other but the House of God; this is the gate of Heaven."

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## YOUR CHRISTIAN RURAL FELLOWSHIP

### What It Is . . .

The Christian Rural Fellowship is a voluntary membership organization composed of ordained and lay people interested in the quality of rural life around the world. It is nondenominational and international.

The membership now numbers more than 3,500. Members are found in every state of the United States, in Canada, and in twenty-two foreign countries--and among twenty-eight denominations.

It is the only religious organization that attempts to tie together the rural leaders in all lands in the interests of a Christian rural civilization. It is in every sense a fellowship. This fellowship is provided through the Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin, news letters, quarterly Rural Missions, the Worship Bulletin, and conferences.

### What It Does . . .

The Christian Rural Fellowship serves in the following ways:

- It promotes Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life.
- It magnifies and dignifies the rural church and the rural pastorate.
- It interprets the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the process of agriculture and the relationships of rural life.
- It emphasizes man's moral and ethical responsibility as keeper of the Holy Earth.
- It appeals to lay as well as professional people related to agriculture, rural life, and the rural church.
- It fosters a spiritual fellowship among people in many lands and unites them in the common cause of a better rural life based on religious foundations.
- It interprets the role of rural people in world unity and peace.
- It provides a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies.
- Through its Bulletin and other published materials it provides creative literature which stimulates and challenges the rural church and the religious leadership of rural life to a new appreciation of the vital significance of the rural church to the world-wide church and, indeed, to Christian civilization.

### What Others Think . . .

. . . "As a rural minister, I am in constant search for inspiration and guidance in the rural religious task. And more recently as a part-time instructor in rural life and leadership in seminary, I am anxious to find materials which will be most helpful to the students. No rural minister or person concerned about Christianity and rural life can afford to neglect this rich mine of inspiration and information."

. . . "The fine pioneering you have done in publishing your Bulletins and creating a new rural church literature cannot in my judgment be too highly commended. I would not want to see this work jeopardized in any way."